

PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS AND ASSOCIATED INFECTIONS

AUGUST 2017

Drugs and People Who Use Them

Drug use is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that encompasses a range of behaviors. It affects not only those who use, but their loved ones and the communities in which they live as well. While there are inherent risks associated with all drug use, some methods of using drugs are safer than others. Injecting drugs comes with high risks, especially when it's taking place with contaminated syringes or other injecting equipment (including cookers, cottons, water, and tourniquets). Injection drug use is a major cause of infections like Hepatitis C, Hepatitis B, and HIV.

Along with health issues, people who inject drugs (PWID) also tend to have high prevalence of mental health issues and trauma, poor social support, and higher levels of homelessness or incarceration.

The Public Health Issue

There are many potentially serious health complications associated with illicit drug use. These complications can range from tracking and bruising at injection sites, to bacterial infections and communicable diseases, as well as overdose and death.

Many of the infections associated with people who inject drugs are easily transmitted when injection equipment is being shared. When these types of infections affect groups of people who inject drugs, a huge burden is put on local institutions like hospitals, detention centers, and health departments. Individuals are presenting in emergency departments or urgent care settings with serious infections and no insurance or other means to pay for the necessary treatment. Because drug-related stigma has such a significant impact on the relationships between people who use drugs and these institutions, overdose and death because of, is happening more often. People who use injection drugs are falling through major healthcare gaps, all while the spread of these infections continues.

Hepatitis C

- Inflammation of the liver caused by the Hepatitis C virus
- Blood borne and most commonly transmitted through IV drug use, unregulated healthcare practices, transfusion of unscreened blood products, and sex.
- Can cause serious liver disease, including cirrhosis and liver cancer, if left untreated
- Curable, but expensive

The Numbers

- 71 million people infected **worldwide**
- 2.7-3.9 million infected in the **United States**
- 7,437 confirmed infections in **Montana**
- 521 confirmed cases in **Cascade County**

This health profile was based on information and data gathered from the following organizations:

Harm Reduction Coalition <http://harmreduction.org/>

World Health Organization <http://www.who.int/en/>

CDC <https://www.cdc.gov/>

hiv.gov (formerly aids.gov)



CITY-COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Infections Related to People Who Inject Drugs (PWID)

- Hepatitis C
- Hepatitis B
- HIV
- Staph infection
- Cellulitis
- Tetanus
- Septic thrombophlebitis
- Bacterial endocarditis
- Necrotizing fasciitis
- Abscesses
- Septicemia

Between July 2016—June 2017, our local hospital saw 95 patients admitted for infections associated with injection drug use.

All of these associated infections are 100% PREVENTABLE!

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Human Immunodeficiency Virus

- The virus that can lead to *acquired immunodeficiency syndrome* (AIDS)
- Transmitted through blood, semen and vaginal fluids, breastmilk, and childbirth
- Attacks the body's immune system, specifically the CD4 cells, which help the immune system fight off infections
- Makes infected individuals highly susceptible to get other infections
- No effective cure exists, but with proper medical care, HIV can be controlled

The Numbers

- 36.7 million people infected **globally**
- 1.1 million people infected in the **United States**
- Just over 600 people in **Montana** are living with HIV
- Approximately 40 individuals in **Cascade County** living with HIV



HARM REDUCTION

The Harm Reduction Coalition defines harm reduction as a set of practical strategies that reduce negative consequences of drug use, incorporating a spectrum of strategies from safer use, to managed use, to abstinence. These strategies meet drug users “where they’re at,” addressing conditions of use along with the use itself. Some examples of harm reduction include:

- Syringe/needle access programs
- There are currently 214 syringe access programs operating in 166 cities and 30 states in the United States.
- Opioid substitution therapy
- Behavioral intervention
- Sexual and reproductive health intervention
- Training on overdose prevention for PWID and Naloxone administration

Hepatitis B

- Inflammation of the liver caused by the Hepatitis B virus
- Blood borne and most commonly transmitted through IV drug use, sex, contact with blood/open sores of an infected person, needle sticks
- Medication is available to treat chronic infection, but not acute infection
- Can lead to liver disease or liver cancer
- Vaccine is available

The Numbers

- Hepatitis B causes an estimated 1,800 deaths per year in the United States
- 240 million infected globally
- 850,000—2.2 million infected in the United States

For more information, suggestions, or contributions please contact :

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